

seasons pass and we're not the same by Iris Violetta

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Summary: Holidays can be tough. But neither the Wheelers nor the Byers were prepared for this Thanksgiving, when a long-hidden secret finally came to light. Nothing would ever be the same.

seasons pass and we're not the same

November 1998

"The blue striped polo? No, no, the grey button-down." Mike muttered to himself under his breath as he threw clothes into his duffel bag. He'd left packing until the last minute, which was not a surprise. But he would be lying to himself if he said it wasn't because he was feeling unsettled about the trip. He hadn't been to Hawkins since Holly's high school graduation the past June. And that was nothing new: he only returned for major holidays now.

He heard the front door open and a voice called out. "Hey hon, you almost ready to go?"

"Yep, just finishing packing. I'll be out in a sec."

He tossed in some extra socks and zipped up the weathered blue bag before heading out to the living room, doubling back to grab his toothbrush. His girlfriend stood by the entry, arms crossed and head cocked in mock exasperation. But she quickly broke into a smile and he leaned down to peck her cheek.

"Okay, okay, now I'm ready."

"Perfect, I've got the car out front."

Mike stood up straight and saluted her. "Lead the way, Sophie."

Sophie smirked and reached out to tickle under his arm. "You're such a dork."

They headed down to the car.

Mike was looking forward to his mom's delicious home cooking, but he knew there would be the usual jabs about how he never visited. Even Nancy, who lived in New York, came home more often than he did. Luckily, now that she and Jonathan were married, Thanksgiving included the Byers so he'd have Will there with him. However, this was the first time Mike was bringing his girlfriend home. The first girl he'd *ever* introduced to his family. Yeah, there was definitely

going to be some teasing.

Sophie was sweet and smart. Wispy blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes which were slightly magnified under her large wire-frame glasses. She had a wry humor and they got along well. And, most importantly, she was completely separate from his childhood. They'd met in the same graduate program at Northwestern and quickly became friends, each being a little awkward and nerdy. They both ended up in Chicago after finishing their degrees, and after a few years their friendship turned into a relationship. Mike was happy.

Sophie fiddled with the radio as he drove them out of the city, finally setting on a classic rock station.

"I can't believe I'm finally meeting your family. It's been what, like a year and a half?"

"That's not that long."

"Yeah but we've known each other for years and you've met my family like ten times so..."

"Well that's not fair, they live right outside the city. Hawkins isn't exactly next door."

"Yeah, but it's not *that* hard to get to." She softly added, "We could go more often, you know."

"I know. I just... I like my life here. *Our* life here." He reached for her hand over the center console and interlaced their fingers. He was happy she was coming with him, he really was.

Going back to Hawkins was never easy, but it didn't help that this year was the 15th anniversary of Will's disappearance. Of *her*.

He shook his head, as if that would clear away his unwanted thoughts. It would be fine.

November 1984

It had been five days. Five days since the gate had been closed, five

days since Will had been saved. Five days since El had walked back into Mike's life.

It was Friday afternoon and Mike had been given special permission to keep El company while Hopper was at work. The chief was in the process of planning the next steps for her, and in the meantime she was still on house arrest. But, as a special compromise, he'd given Mike the directions to the cabin, along with a stern lecture about the importance of being stealthy.

For El, it was far beyond halfway-happy.

They were splayed across the couch, some soap opera softly playing in the background, Mike's fingers working their way through El's curls. This was their first time truly alone, with no impending doom or pesky, well-meaning friends.

For Mike, it was the turning point, the beginning of the rest of their lives. He told her about all the things they would do once she could leave: the games at the arcade and the movies at the local theater and the lake in the summer. But there was something in the near future that he was especially interested in.

"So...I dunno if Hopper will let you, but I was thinking maybe..."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe we could go to the Snow Ball this year." He blushed as she stared at him, her wide doe eyes shining.

"Promise?" She asked in a soft voice, and Mike felt bright inside, so much lighter than the last time they'd discussed the stupid school dance. Everything was going to be okay.

"Promise."

He sat up and was tempted to kiss her, but was interrupted by sudden, heavy footsteps on the porch. The door burst open, one of the hinges breaking off, and armored men holding machine guns stormed in. El was up in a flash, hand held in front of her chest and her chin pulled down, but nothing seemed to be happening. Her eyes grew large as she panicked. Time slowed for Mike, like he was stuck

in a dream. He could tell that her powers weren't working. What was happening?

The men parted and a small boy stepped forward. He didn't look much younger than them, wearing a navy sweatsuit and a fresh buzz cut. A droplet of blood was just beginning to form under his nose. A tall man stood beside him in a crisp suit, his hand gently, but territorially, on the boy's shoulder. His smile reminded her of Papa.

"Eleven, it's good to finally meet you. I'm Dr. Randolph. And this is Twelve."

Mike was struck by the cold and hard look in the boy's eyes. He was almost like a robot. El kept trying to overcome the block and began to shake, blood leaking from both nostrils.

"Don't exhaust yourself. This is Twelve's special ability."

"What do you want?" Mike asked, attempting to sound braver than he felt. Randolph didn't even spare a glance his way.

"We've come to take you to your new home, my dear. We have work to do, Eleven. We aren't even close to being finished."

"No." She was trying to keep her voice level, but a tremor broke through.

"No?" Randolph flicked his eyes over to one of the soldiers and briskly nodded. The man grabbed Mike, holding him close and pressing an arm against his throat. Mike struggled to breathe.

"Mike!" El gasped, taking a step forward before she felt a barrier in the air, pushing her back. Another drop of blood leaked from Twelve's nose.

"What is your plan here, Eleven? To go to school? To play with your friends? To be a normal child? Oh, you have never been anything but extraordinary. You are meant for so much more."

"I don't want it." El whispered. "*This* is my home."

"That's where you're wrong. You are property of the United States

government. You have no birth certificate, no legal identity. You don't exist. The chief? He has nowhere to go to make you official. You aren't a real person. But you are so much more than that."

She said nothing, but a few tears escaped down her cheeks and Mike's heart ached. He struggled against the soldier's arms but the hold on his throat tightened.

"Of course, if you refuse to cooperate, we'll be forced to come after your friends. After all, they would be stealing, stealing from the US government. Let's see..." He pulled out a paper from his inner pocket and studied it. "Nancy Wheeler. Lucas Sinclair. Dustin Henderson. Joyce Byers. James Hopper. And, of course, Michael here."

Randolph looked over at Mike and gave another nod. It happened so quick, an instant blinding pain in his hand. Mike couldn't contain his scream; the man had broken his finger.

"Stop!" El cried, choking on her tears. She turned to Randolph and tried not to look at Twelve's dead eyes. "Okay...okay. I'll go."

"El, no-" Mike shouted, but his mouth was quickly covered. He shouted against the glove and struggled to remove it with his good hand.

Randolph smiled. "Good, then that's taken care of. Let's go."

He swept out of the cabin, Twelve at his heels and the soldiers following. The guard dropped Mike and nudged El forward. She paused at the door, turning back to see him crumpled on the kitchen floor. She tried to convey everything through her eyes, every thought and feeling, most of which she couldn't have named if she wanted to. She was about to give herself over to the water and he was her last gasp of air. She could only whisper, "Goodbye, Mike."

And then she was gone. He was left crying on the floor, the cabin full of an oppressive silence, the overturned chairs the only sign of a disruption. She was gone. She was gone.

Mike would remember everything that happened in the cabin with painful clarity; the aftermath would become fuzzy memories. A

hysterical phone call to the police station, frantically biking out of the woods while trying to ignore his throbbing finger. Tearful words over the supercom, Lucas finding him in the ditch by Mirkwood. He must have fallen off his bike, crying too hard to properly see. Ending up at the Byers' house, still only halfway repaired from the past weekend.

That was the moment Mike would always recall, wedged between Will and Nancy on the couch, Dustin sitting at their feet with his hand on Mike's knee. Lucas and Max looked on from the other couch, with matching trails of tear stains on their cheeks. Jonathan busied himself in the kitchen, frying up eggs that no one was hungry for. There was still no sign of Hopper, and Joyce had gone to look for him.

"It's my fault. It's all my fault." Mike cried over and over, sobbing into his sister's shirt. "They must have followed me. It's my fault."

They never saw her again.

November 1998

"Okay, you can't make fun of my Star Trek posters anymore," Sophie laughed as she stood in the middle of Mike's childhood bedroom.

"Uh, please, it's called *taste*," Mike retorted. She scoffed sarcastically and continued to look around the room.

Things were going well so far. His dad had been polite and even seemed interested in what Sophie was saying. His mom was in her element, a glass of wine in one hand, flitting around the kitchen. Holly, home from her first semester at nearby IU, was totally enamored of Sophie and stayed close to her side.

Sophie gasped. "Oh my god, is this...?" She twirled around, holding up a framed photo. "Little Mike? Oh my goodness, and little Will and Lucas. And this must be...Dustin, right?"

She cooed as she gazed down at the photo from the science fair, all those years ago. He took it from her and squinted down at it.

"Yeah, I think we're like twelve here."

They heard a snicker from the doorway and turned to see Holly leaning into the room with a raised eyebrow. "Oh, Sophie, you wanna see some embarrassing Mike photos, then you better come with me."

Sophie squeezed Mike's arm before trotting after his sister, their giggles echoing in the hallway. He looked back down at the frame in his hand, using his sleeve to wipe a smudge from the glass. Then he carefully undid the backing, pulling out the second photo that had been hidden inside. An old black-and-white that Jonathan had snuck of Mike and Eleven on the couch the morning after she had closed the gate. A plate of Eggos was balanced on Mike's lap and El was curled into his side, smiling as she looked down at the waffles. He was looking at her. Dustin, Lucas and Max were piled on the floor below them, still dead asleep. Jonathan had given Mike the photo a few weeks after she'd left.

The only photo he had of her. The only photo of El, *their* El, that existed. The only proof he had that she had been real.

You don't exist. You're not a real person. Those words especially had haunted him since that day, digging into his psyche until he sometimes wondered if he had dreamed her up. He'd never repeated them to anyone. They'd felt too foreign on his tongue, too utterly *wrong*.

"Mike! Nancy and the Byers are here!" His mom yelled from downstairs. Mike quickly put the photo back into place and closed up the frame before jogging out of the room. He only got halfway down the stairwell before he saw Will standing at the bottom with his arms open.

"Wheeler!"

"Byers!"

"You guys know that doesn't really work when we're all Byers and Wheelers here, right?" Nancy said with a wry smile while she watched her brother and brother-in-law embrace.

"Sophie's not...yet," Holly chimed in slyly.

"That's right! Dear brother, please introduce me to the guest of honor."

Mike rolled his eyes but laughed. After introductions were made, they set the table and feasted, trading old stories and laughter over the plethora of dishes.

Afterwards everyone scattered to digest before dessert. Ted promptly fell asleep in his recliner, while Joyce helped Karen clean up in the kitchen. Holly had the idea to run to the video store to rent something for the family to watch after pie and she recruited Sophie to help.

"Holly really loves Sophie, huh?" Will said teasingly as he and Nancy watched the girls head to the car.

Nancy shrugged. "She never knew El so...I suppose this is all new to her."

He was surprised - he'd never thought about it. But of course... He, Nancy, Jonathan - they'd all been subconsciously comparing Sophie to El. That's what seemed so weird about the whole thing. He felt bad - it wasn't fair to Sophie. Or Mike, either.

The girl he hadn't seen or heard of since middle school. No, not fair at all.

When Mike walked back into the kitchen, Will grabbed him a beer and suggested going downstairs to look at the old hangout space. They weren't down there long before Jonathan joined them and they reminisced about their old D&D campaigns.

"Remember the campaign with the Thessalhydra? And those weird flowers in the cave that you didn't ever explain?"

"Hey, I was twelve, not some professional novelist."

"I guess we never really did play much after middle school, huh?"

Mike shrugged, eyes on the carpet. "Just wasn't fun anymore."

There was a silence here that would have normally gone unacknowledged, but Will found himself speaking anyway. Maybe it was the wine loosening his tongue or maybe it was that Nancy's words were still fresh in his mind. Either way, he put a hand on Mike's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"It's okay. I just can't believe it's been so long."

Jonathan fiddled with his bottle on the couch tearing at the label. Will looked at Mike with concern.

"Mike, you gotta stop blaming yourself for that."

"I can't."

"You were just a kid, you were both kids."

"It was bound to happen anyway," Jonathan added.

"What?" Will asked.

"I mean, they were never gonna stop looking for her, y'know? They thought of her as their property. She wasn't a real person to them. She didn't *exist* in the real world."

Mike whipped his head to look at him. "What did you say?"

"She was considered government property. She didn't officially exist as a real person. She didn't have paperwork or anything."

"How..." He paused, swallowing hard. "How did you know that?"

Something in Mike's eyes changed and Jonathan knew he had made a mistake.

November 1984

It had been four days. Four days since his house was torn apart again, four days since he watched his brother writhe in pain while strapped to a bed. Four days since he'd been allowed to find comfort in Nancy's arms.

It was Thursday night and Jonathan was finally leaving after his late shift at the diner. He was tired - he'd been taking extra shifts to help pay for fixing up the house and since his mom had been staying home with Will the last few days. He groaned internally as he thought of the history reading he still had to do.

He wasn't pleased when he saw two figures loitering by his car on the far side of the parking lot. His coworker, Eric, noticed too.

"You need any help?" He asked as they both paused outside the restaurant. One of the men looked up and Jonathan realized he recognized him - Murray Bauman. His heart dropped and he waved off Eric.

"Nah, I know him. Go on home."

"Night, man."

Jonathan tried to ignore the pit in his stomach as he walked toward his car. He'd only seen the disgraced journalist four days ago - when he had told them to not contact him again. This couldn't be good.

"Ah, Jonathan Byers. Long time, no see."

Again, it had been four days.

"Murray." Jonathan nodded before hesitantly asking, "What's going on?"

Murray smiled wide, showing his teeth and Jonathan was reminded of the wolves from those old fairy tales. This man was going to devour him if he wasn't careful.

"I'd like to introduce you to a..." He turned to the dark-haired man beside him and cocked his head. "Well, would you say we're friends, Larry?"

"I think that will depend, Mr. Bauman." The man turned back to Jonathan and extended his hand. "Dr. Randolph. A pleasure to meet you, Jonathan."

Jonathan kept his hands firmly in the pockets of his jeans. "Can I help

you?"

"Right to business. I knew I would like you."

"Yeah, so uh, Larry here works for another branch of the illustrious Department of Energy."

Jonathan could tell that Murray was driving Randolph crazy but that the man was trying to keep it together.

"Apparently they intercepted the tapes we sent. All of them. And..."

Randolph cut in. "Look, we're not stupid. We know you still have the original tape. So I'd like to make a deal. We'll let you send out the altered tapes, with the information about 'leaked toxins' and the government covering up Barbara Holland's death. And if a publication chooses to expose it - and I'm sure one of them will - we'll go ahead and close Hawkins Lab. Place is too much of a liability now anyway."

Jonathan could tell that there was more. "But?"

"Smart boy!" Murray barked and smacked his hand against the hood of the car.

Jonathan kept his eyes on Randolph. "What do you want?"

The doctor had an unsettling smile, too. "I need to know where Eleven is."

He wasn't expecting this. Why didn't he expect this? "I don't know what you're talking about."

Murray gave a dry laugh. "Yeah, cut the shit kid, he knows that you know about her."

"And we know she's been back," Randolph added.

"You want me to turn her in?"

"I do. She belongs to us."

"She's a little girl."

"And a very dangerous one. Look, here's the deal. She will never have a normal life. Ever. She has no birth certificate; she is in no way a legal citizen. She has no legal identity. She won't be able to go to school. She won't be able to get a driver's license, a job, married. In the eyes of the government, she does not exist. Except as its property."

"You really think I give a shit what the government thinks?"

"No, I don't. I'm just telling you what the reality is. She will have to live off the grid, for the rest of her life. And so will anyone that associates with her." He pulled out a slip of paper from his pocket and peered at it. "Nancy and Mike Wheeler? Your brother? Your mother?" He clucked in disapproval. "Harboring a fugitive is a federal crime."

"How can she be a fugitive if she doesn't exist?"

"Son, this is the U.S. government. We can make her exist when we need to."

Murray spoke up. "Look, Jonathan, we still have a chance to do what we wanted. To finish what we started, what *Nancy* started. Your friends, your family? They have a real shot at a happy life here. A life where your brother is healthy and left alone. Where your mom doesn't have to worry about him. Where Nancy is *happy*, where she's avenged her friend."

Murray and Randolph stared down at him and he realized how trapped he was. How utterly *fucked* he was.

"Okay, okay. All right." He rubbed a hand over his forehead and sighed. "The chief is hiding her."

"Chief Hopper?"

"Yeah. I can give you directions to the place."

He described it as best he could, remembering the directions that Hopper had given him only days ago. When Randolph finished taking

notes, he nodded at Jonathan.

"Pleasure doing business. Keep an eye on the papers. Have a good night."

Murray clapped him on the shoulder, a sick smile on his face. "I knew you'd be the one to help. Nancy's too..." He waved his hand from side to side. "Ehhh, idealistic. Noble. You and I know how things really go, don't we?"

Jonathan just stared back at him, not trusting himself to reply. He watched as the men walked back to their car and tried not to throw up. What had he done? What had he *done*?

Eleven was powerful. She would be able to fight them off, right?

Twenty-four hours later, as he listened to Mike sob in his living room, Jonathan realized just how wrong he was. He didn't know if he would ever be able to forgive himself.

November 1998

The story unraveled from Jonathan, as if it had been trying to escape all along. A deadly silence hung in the air.

"What?" Mike asked in a low voice. Will was stock still, arms wrapped around himself. There was a noise on the stairs and the boys turned to see Nancy standing on the bottom step.

"Did you hear all that?" Mike asked his sister.

She bit her lip and nodded; she didn't look shocked. Why didn't she look shocked? Mike's eyes widened and he backed away a few steps.

"You knew. You knew about this."

"Not at first. Not for the first few months or so."

"But you knew. So much for we tell each other everything, right?" His raised his voice, pain edging it. "You knew!"

"Jonathan?" Will asked, shaking his head in astonishment. Everything had changed.

"I had to make a decision. Okay? I'm not happy about it. I'm not proud of it."

Mike started to pace. "I thought it was all my fault. I always blamed myself. You knew that, Nancy. You *let* me think that!"

"Mike..." She whispered and Jonathan held up a hand.

"Hey, don't blame her."

Mike spun around to face him, his finger shaking as he pointed it at him. "You don't tell me what to do. You don't *fucking* tell me what to do!"

Nancy took two steps forward to stand between them, arms outspread.

"Calm down, Mike."

"Calm down? You want me to calm down?" He threw his beer bottle against the far wall, the bottleneck breaking off.

Jonathan frowned, his patience for Mike wearing thin. "What, were we all just gonna become fugitives? I wanted Will to be okay, I wanted Nancy to be okay. My mom, everyone."

"I didn't ask you to do that," Will said from the corner he had backed up into, but no one seemed to hear.

"Yeah, Hopper seems to be doing real well," Mike snapped.

"We don't know that," Nancy said. "No one's heard from him in years."

Mike's eyes grew wild and he let out a short hollow laugh. "Yeah, because *your husband* fucked him over. Practically pushed him down the bottle."

"Mike, that's not fair."

"I wanted everyone to be able to have their lives back."

"Not everyone," Mike growled.

"What?"

"NOT EVERYONE!" He roared, tears leaking down his cheeks.

Will thought he saw the lamp flicker beside him. He wasn't sure if anyone else had noticed.

"She was my future. You took that from me. No, you know what? You took that from *her*!" Mike slammed his palm against the wall and everyone jumped. "She was a person; she was a human! You took her life away. You basically killed her." He choked on a sob and whispered, "How could you?"

He sank onto the couch and continued to cry. No one dared to move.

"Mike?"

Sophie stood on the basement stairs, looking confused and concerned, Holly just one step above her. Karen hovered in the doorway. Joyce was beside her, hand covering her mouth.

"I think we need to talk."

Mike rubbed a hand over his puffy, tearstained face and nodded. Jonathan forced himself to meet his mother's eyes. Nancy finally let herself cry. Will clasped his hands together in a futile attempt to stop them from trembling.

Nothing was the same.

November 1998

Eleven stood in the void, watching the scene unfold in the basement before her. She'd managed to keep her cool for the most part, only breaking once. It seemed like no one noticed though. Maybe Will. He always was more attuned to those things than the others.

She felt tangled inside, her heart within a vice that was slowly tightening. But even though it had been months since she'd last looked in on Mike, on any of them, her eyes remained dry. She didn't cry much anymore.

There was a soft splashing in the background and Fifteen came to stand beside her. "Who are they?"

"No one. Just people I used to know."

Fifteen sighed and ran a hand through her silky black hair. "We should get going. This assignment won't be easy."

Eleven gave a short nod and a tight smile. "Let's go."

The Wheelers and the Byers faded away into the darkness as the girls moved on to their next mark.

Goodbye Mike.